

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7003

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SUBJECT: DISTRIBUTION OF FEDERAL BENEFIT CHECKS IN PANAMA

1. THE AREA OF FEDERAL BENEFITS IN GENERAL AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF RETIREMENT CHECKS IN PARTICULAR, IS OF GROWING CONCERN AND COMPLEXITY TO THIS POST.

2. PROBLEMS ARISE IN PANAMA DUE TO THE FOLLOWING CIRCUMSTANCES:

A. MAIL SERVICE: THERE IS NO HOME DELIVERY OF MAIL IN PANAMA, ONLY DELIVERY TO POST OFFICE BOXES AND GENERAL DELIVERY. LESS THAN 20 PERCENT OF PANAMA'S CHECK RECIPIENTS CAN AFFORD POST OFFICE BOXES. THE LOSS/FORGERY RATE OF CHECKS SENT UN-REGISTERED TO GENERAL DELIVERY ADDRESSES IS ABOUT 50 PERCENT. BANKS WHICH FORMERLY ACCEPTED CHECKS BY MAIL HAVE REFUSED TO ACCEPT THEM ANY LONGER. ALL CHECKS SENT BY MAIL, OVER 500 PER MONTH, ARE INDIVIDUALLY REGISTERED AND MAILED AT A COST OF 67 CENTS PER CHECK. AS A RESULT OF THE ABYSMAL MAIL SERVICE, THE MAJORITY OF ALL CHECKS ARE DISTRIBUTED IN MONTHLY IN TWO MASS SESSIONS, ONE IN PANAMA CITY (APPROX 3000) AND ONE IN COLON (APPROX 1400). PREPARATION OF CHECKS FOR HAND OR REGISTERED MAIL DELIVERY DEMANDS A LABOR INPUT NEVER IMAGINED IN 7 FAM 250. PROCEDURES OUTLINE IN 7FAM 251.6 (F) AND (G) ARE IMPOSSIBLE IN PANAMA.

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B. NUMBER OF CHECKS: THE PROCEDURES IN 7 FAM ARE FEASIBLE AT A POST HANDLING A LIMITED NUMBER OF CHECKS, BUT DIFFICULT IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE IN PANAMA GIVEN THE NUMBER OF CHECKS AT PRESENT AND PROJECTED STAFFING PATTERNS.

C. ILLITERACY OF CHECK RECIPIENTS: VIRTUALLY ALL CHECK

RECIPIENTS IN PANAMA ARE LABORERS RETIRED FROM THE PANAMA CANAL COMPANY AND ARE LITERATE IN NEITHER SPANISH NOR ENGLISH.

3. DUE TO THE ABOVE MENTIONED SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES, CONSULAR FOLLOW-UP IN INDIVIDUAL CASES IS EXTREMELY LABOR INTENSIVE. ATTEMPTS TO HAVE CHECK RECIPIENTS CORRESPOND DIRECTLY WITH THE AGENCIES CONCERNED CAUSE MORE CONFUSION THAN THEY CURE. AS THE CHECK RECIPIENTS ARE UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE FORMS, DIRECT CONTACT WITH THE CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION OR OTHER AGENCY USUALLY RESULTS IN AN ERRONEOUS SUSPENSION OF BENEFITS AND RESULTS IN THE RECIPIENT CAMPING ON THE CONSULAR SECTION DOOR STEP UNTIL A CORRECTION CAN BE SENT. MOST CHECK RECIPIENTS, WHO ARE USED TO BEING PAID IN PERSON BY THE PANAMA CANAL COMPANY, FIND IT IMPOSSIBLE TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE CHECKS ARE NOT PREPARED BY THE EMBASSY IN PANAMA, BUT RATHER BY AGENCIES IN THE UNITED STATES.

4. EMBASSY EXPECTS THE PRESENT DIFFICULT SITUATION TO DETERIORATE DRAMATICALLY UPON THE COMING INTO FORCE OF THE PANAMA CANAL TREATIES, AT WHICH TIME THE NUMBER OF RETIREES WILL RISE PRECIPITOUSLY AND THE CANAL ZONE POSTAL SYSTEM WILL GO OUT OF EXISTENCE. (IT APPEARS THAT IN ADDITION TO THE CHECKS DISTRIBUTED BY THE EMBASSY, A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER ARE ROUTED DIRECTLY TO RECIPIENTS

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THROUGH THE CANAL ZONE POSTAL SYSTEM.

5. IN VIEW OF THE FOREGOING, EMBASSY PANAMA BELIEVES THIS FIELD OF CONSULAR LABOR MUST BE CLOSELY SCRUTINIZED WITH A VIEW TO REDUCTION, ELIMINATION, OR ALTERNATIVE FUNDING AND STAFFING. EMBASSY'S PREFERRED COURSE WOULD BE ELIMINATION (IF THIS WERE LEGALLY POSSIBLE) AND ITS FIRST ALTERNATIVE TO BE STAFFING AND FUNDING BY CONCERNED FEDERAL AGENCIES. PANAMA REPRESENTATIVE TO FORTHCOMING CONSULAR CONFERENCE HOPES DISCUSS THIS ISSUE IN DETAIL, BOTH IN CONTEXT OF CONFERENCE ITSELF AND (BECAUSE OTHER PARTICIPANTS MAY NOT BE SEIZED OF PROBLEM TO SAME DEGREE AS PANAMA) IN DIRECT CONVERSATIONS WITH APPROPRIATE OFFICERS IN CA. JORDEN

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